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## Know Your Exotics

by  
Jan Whitlock\*

Veterinarians are of great service to their clients if they can give them general information on how to care for their exotic pets and know how to handle and treat these pets when they are sick. The raccoon is a very common exotic pet which may be brought into your hospital. Wild raccoons, which have been found after being injured, are often presented to you for treatment. For the safety of both the veterinarian and the raccoon a little general knowledge can prove very helpful.

When a raccoon is brought to you, be sure your client is aware of the state regulations regarding the keeping of raccoons. Since raccoons are wild animals, most states require the owner to obtain a permit to keep them. Veterinarians should be aware of the regulations in their area to inform their clients. This information can be obtained though your state or county conservation officer.

You can also be of assistance to your client if you can instruct him as to the proper diet for the raccoon. In nature a raccoon feeds on crayfish, frogs, insects, fruits and rodents. In captivity they do well on dog food. Either a canned ration

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or a dry ration can be used, however, the dry ration may be preferable in that it helps to avoid tooth problems as seen in dogs. This diet can be supplemented with fruits and vitamins if desired. Raccoons do not have to wash their food but often will soak it if water is present. The proper diet is important because raccoons in captivity often develop skeletal problems due to an improper calcium to phosphorus ratio and vitamin D<sub>3</sub> deficiency. Their bones then become very weak and fracture easily.

One of the reasons veterinarians are reluctant to work with raccoons is that they don't know how to restrain them for examination and therapy to avoid injury to themselves and the raccoon. This can be accomplished with chemical restraint using Ketamine at a dosage of 10–12 mg./lb.<sup>1</sup> If a tamed raccoon is brought to you in a harness with a leash, you can restrain it for injection by putting it in a cage and pulling the raccoon against the door. If the animal is not tamed you may need to use a press frame or squeeze cage. Also effective is to snare the animal for a short time to give the intramuscular injection. It is important when you are restraining

the raccoon to remember that if it has not had a proper diet the bones may be very fragile and could be broken easily if restraint is too vigorous.

As for preventive medicine, raccoons are susceptible to rabies, canine distemper, and feline distemper, and should be vaccinated for these diseases. The rabies vaccine should be an inactivated product because a modified live virus vaccine may induce a clinical case of rabies. Raccoons also very commonly have parasites. Most common are ascarids, tapeworms, and physoloptera. They can be treated with Levamisole at a dosage of 5–10 mg./lb. or Piperazine at a dosage of 40–50 mg./lb. with a repeated treatment.<sup>2</sup>

There are various opinions as to the best way to obtain a blood sample in a raccoon. The femoral vein and the jugular vein are the most strongly recommended but the cephalic and saphenous veins may also be tried. The normal blood values for a raccoon are:<sup>2</sup>

RBC  $11 \times 10^6$

Hb 10–11 mg./100 ml

PCV 35–40%

ESR 1–2 mm/hr.

WBC  $13\text{--}16 \times 10^3$

Neutrophils 45%

Lymphocytes 49%

Monocytes 2%

Eosinophils 3%

Basophils 0%

Some references that may help you in working with exotic animals are:

1. *The Management of Wild Animals in Captivity*, by Lee S. Crandall.
2. *Current Veterinary Therapy V*, edited by Robert W. Kirk
3. *Diseases of Wild Mammals*, edited by John W. Davis, Lars H. Karstad and Daniel O. Trainer.
4. *Parasitic Diseases of Wild Mammals*, edited by John W. Davis and Roy C. Anderson.
5. *Merck Veterinary Manual* (FLZ section).
6. Your local zoo veterinarian.

#### References

1. Hauptert, J. and Lindeen, M. The Iowa State University Veterinarian, 36:1 (21–22).
2. Kirk, R. W. *Current Veterinary Therapy V*, pp. 617–625.
3. Graham, David, DVM, PhD. Dept. of Vet. Path. ISU College of Vet. Med. personal communication.
4. Picture by Chari Wessel, Third year student in vet. med. ISU College of Vet. Med.

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